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File: 4th Aviation
Squadron
(later Squadron F)

UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Interview

of

BRIGADIER GENERAL HARRY C. ADERHOLT

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By

Mr. Hugh N. Ahmann

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Transcribed and Edited by Faye Davis

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ADERHOLT

A: Wait a minute. Did you get involved in any of these flights in Yugoslavia?

G: No.

A: What were you flying as a C-47 pilot from North Africa to Sicily and Italy?

G: No. We were training to invade Rome when I first got there. We were going to make an airborne assault on Rome, and we hauled gliders around at night training. All the copilots checked out in CG-4A gliders; I was a copilot. I got checked out in a CG-4A glider, then about that time they cancelled. They didn't make an airborne operation into Rome. They were going to actually assault the airfield in Rome.

Right after that I moved down to North Africa, the 36th Air Depot Group, where all these great test pilots were, but I wasn't one of them. I was just a mail man. I spent 21 months and made captain, came back, and volunteered for B-29s. I knew damn well I couldn't get into a fighter job, but I figured they would lose enough -29s that I might get in those. (Laughter) They sent me to instructor school at Columbus in B-17s, waiting for a -29 assignment, and the war was over. I transferred to Maxwell Field. They were looking for a staff pilot. I went to Maxwell, and there I sat.

A: Had you decided to make a career out of the military?

G: No. What happened was, when we came back, I was one of the first guys coming into Fort McPherson [GA], and Eddie Rickenbacker [Capt Edward V.] was there. He was looking for military pilots with Gooney Bird time.

A: For his Eastern Airlines?

G: Yes. Everybody wanted to get in the airline. I said, "Hell, I want to go to war. I haven't been to war, really." I turned down a chance to go with Eastern, took my 30-day leave, and reported up to Lockbourne [AFB OH]. They dropped the bomb while I was there, and that was the end of World War II. I went on down to Maxwell and got a Regular commission.

A: How did you get your Regular commission?

G: I was a pretty good drinker. I managed the baseball team, and I was assistant base operations officer; I ran the instrument school. We had a guy down there named "Big Jack" Price. He was an All-American, West Pointer, and a legend. I used to drink with him, several of us. They were having the Army Regular Board at Fort Benning. We had been drinking, and he said to me one night, "Why don't you put in for Regular?" I said, "I have no education; I haven't a chance." He said, "I'm going to be on the Board. You've got a good chance."

Meanwhile, I got married and left base ops. Oh, they were getting people out. There was a real purge. I was managing a baseball team, along with Bob Nabors [Lt Col Robert G.], who got killed; he was an ex-big-leaguer.

I got a call from Bill Covington [Col William E., Jr.], the base commander. He said, "Heinie, you are going to have to get a real important job. We are going to get a real cutback here, and a lot of people are going to go. We've got a lot of pilots. Have you ever handled black people?" I said, "Hell, I grew up with them." He said, "We've got a real problem over here in Squadron F. We are having all kinds of problems. Do you think you can handle them?" I said, "Hell, yes, I can handle them," so he put me over in Squadron F. That was the black squadron at Maxwell Field. They were all up in arms and having all kinds of problems. We solved those problems.

Well, they used them as nothing but service troops. I had this responsibility and the motor pool. We had the drivers; we had all the tire changers. Oh, and the Air University had started. We did all the janitorial work in the Air University.

(END SIDE 1, TAPE 1)

G: I went over there and took that unit. Primarily what they wanted me to do was to keep them over there, keep them satisfied, and not let them get up on the base. We had our own theater over there by the Federal Prison.

I've got a picture of me while I was commander there. We had 500 blacks. I went down there; it was just myself and 500 blacks. They sent me a lieutenant as an adjutant, a big guy named Harold Pole. We started molding that place over. We won every damn parade. Every time we had a review, Squadron F won it hands down.

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At that time, you didn't have a pass. A pass was a privilege. The guy had to come in and apply for the pass in the afternoon, and he had to be in at 11:00. If he wasn't in--if he came in--they put him in the guard house, and I picked him up on the way to work the next day.

Anyway, I learned a lot. I think that I really learned more there about leadership and about people because here was a bunch of people that were demoralized, yes. In those days the payroll was written up, and we would draw \$10,000 to \$12,000 to pay 500 men. They would come in, and we would count it out to them.

At the end of the payroll, we would sometimes be short. If we were, we would make it up; if we were over, we went and drank beer with it. (Laughter) We had a lot of guys that signed "X"; we had to witness. We had a number of good programs for the black folks there.

About that time Noel Parrish [Brig Gen] had written a document in the Air University on black folks and how we should integrate. The Air Force was really integrated on Noel Parrish's document; I've forgotten the name of it. Anyway, I had the unenviable task of integrating the USO Club there in Montgomery in the Heart of the Confederacy.

We told them we basically picked our best guys, groomed them, and said, "You are going up there, and you are not going to get drunk, and you are not going to do this." When we went up there, all the Montgomery belles went out. The next Saturday we were back up there, and the next Saturday. Pretty soon, one came in, then another one came in. That's the first integration in the Air Force in the South of a service club; the Montgomery belles.

I had my own baseball team. They weren't allowed to play on a baseball team. I managed the baseball team, and I had a black team. I would go play ball with my black outfit against black teams in Alabama. I would be the only white guy!

A: Did they pick you because you were a native-born son?

G: Bill Covington, a West Pointer and a great commander who retired out of there and went back to North Carolina, asked me specifically; "We understand you are from Birmingham. What's your exposure to black people?" I said, "Hell, I grew up with them. I fought with them; I played with them.

A: I worked in the steel mill where they had a black baseball team; we had a white one, and we played each other." He said, "Do you think you can handle it?" I said, "Hell, yes; I know I can."

A: What was the black troop reaction. Here we've got basically a "redneck."

G: In those days that didn't make any difference because they were so subdued and had been segregated and beaten down so long.

We had our own theater. I had an NCO club, then I had a non-NONCOM club. I named it the non-NONCOM club; couldn't go in there if you were a NONCOM.

A: You had that swimming pool out there. They buried that. They have torn down a bunch of the World War II temporaries.

G: The theater and the clubs were temporary, but those stucco buildings--I had 128 in each one, 64 in each side. I remember a guy called me one night and said, "You better come down here; we've got a riot."

This was after they had a big riot at MacDill [AFB FL]. I had duty NCOs; you could appoint them. They had big old night sticks. I called my adjutant, and we went down. I went in the safe and got my .45. They had turned the lights out in the barracks. I had the flood lights controlled from the orderly room; I had those on.

My first sergeant--who was a Tuskegee graduate, old Sergeant Garrett--and I walked up to this door. I said, "I'm coming in, and if any son-of-a-bitch has got his head above the cover, I'm going to shoot him right between the eyes." I charged that goddamned .45. You could have heard it a mile. I knew right where the damn switch was. We kicked open the door--it was summertime--and I flipped the switch. There were 64 sheets up over 64 heads. We went right on through, in each barracks.

The next day I had a muster and said, "I want to know what the hell your problems are. You can speak off the record; nobody is going to do anything. The next time there is going to be action. If any of you want out of the service, just tell me, and I will have you out in a very short time." None of them wanted to get out.

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A: Were you able to change their job and their status at Maxwell?

G: Yes. Let me tell you; I also integrated the basketball league there. We didn't integrate; they wouldn't let us play in the league. I went to the base commander and said, "I'm going to have a basketball team, and I want to play in the league." The other white team said they would strike. I said, "We'll be there, and if you strike----" I knew the kids that ran the gym, and I said, "Schedule us with the best team on the base," which was the air base group that ran the gym.

We went up there, and we just kicked the living hell out of them. We never lost a game, and we played all year! We integrated the intramural sports at Maxwell while I was there. I had the confidence of the base commander. I had the confidence of the troops.

As I say, I think I learned more about people because here were people that were uneducated, had been beaten down; many had been court-martialed. It was just a real problem, but I said at the time--they wanted to kick everybody out that didn't have a score of such-and-such--and we see the results of that today; "Who is going to cook, who is going to pitch tents, who is going to change tires in combat on refueling units, who is going to do the nasty jobs that have to be done when you move"--not like in Vietnam where we sat on the same base for 4 years, but when you start deploying and moving in a war--"who is going to do the dirty work that we contract for today?"

I'm a great believer that the United States Air Force is over-educated; that everybody, even the enlisted people, have all got to have a degree. Isn't there a place for some guy that is satisfied to be a staff sergeant for 20 or 25 years?

I had a guy that was illiterate, Johnny Badell. He couldn't sign his name, but he knew--he had a notebook--and could tell you every tire and the serial number on every tire on every refueling unit and every heavy vehicle on Maxwell Field! He knew, and he could tell you. You could say, "Johnny, what's that tire?" He would get his book out and look and say, "That's old such-and-such." This guy ran the tire change shop. Who does that in the Air Force today?

A: That's all contracted out.

G: So what we've got today is a white-collar Air Force. Where I've been, I'm going to tell you, the women can't make it. When I was at Takhli [AB], the women couldn't make it; the women couldn't make it on the flight line at NKP [Nakhom Phanom], not when I was running the war over there, because I had absolutely no mercy.

They would have had to carry their tool box out. A mechanic's tool box weighs 85 pounds. I look back in contrast and there was a place for people who do not have a degree. Now the desire of the United States Air Force is that every guy has got to have a degree--but who does the dirty work? No college graduate is going to go out and change tires. He is going to be out of rank by then.

A: And if you make him change tires, you've got a disgruntled troop.

G: We had a different situation, but I've seen the blacks-- incidentally, Ben Davis [Lt Gen Benjamin O., Jr.] was a colonel there in the War College when I was there and had the black squadron. I later served under him; he was the 13th Air Force Commander as I finished my tour at NKP. Of course, Ben Davis has the best credentials in the world; he is a fine gentleman, but he went through hell--I guess like no other guy in the Air Force ever has, but that's interesting.

When I spoke at the Air University to CADRE at their dining-out, I said, "You think it is hard to get the United States Air Force to accept their role in counterinsurgency, low-intensity warfare; you ought to try to integrate the blacks into the Montgomery society at the USO club on the base here. Hell, that is nothing compared to this." (Laughter)

A: How long did you have that job, General?

G: I went there in 1946 to 1948, then I went back and ran the instrument school; ran the flying safety; was assistant base operations officer.

A: Were you there when the Air Force integrated? Did they just close down that 1200 area?

G: They didn't integrate while I was there. They started getting better jobs, but that was after I had gone to----

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A: Oh, yes; in December 1948, and even before that, you were down at Tyndall.

G: I came back; that was just 5 months. That's when I left the black squadron. I went to Air Tac School, came back, and went into ops.

No. different organ.

A: Now this tactical school has been reborn. That eventually ended up as SOS. Was this Air Tactical School of any consequence at the time?

G: Well, realizing that people knew very little about the Air Force--you were drafted in; you went off and fought a war; you came back; and you didn't have the background of the people that took ROTC. You didn't have the background of the people that had been in the Air Force before the war, so it was an orientation period. We had an orientation course out there in Building 500 that all the officers had to attend. It was on military history, military justice, and such. That was a good course. I don't know what they teach now at the student officers' course, but that Air Tactical School was a good course. That was my first introduction to an education. I might say it is the only school of the Air Force I have ever gone to.

A: Yes, you managed to avoid PME.

G: I guess there was no potential. (Laughter) I was turned down every time I ever applied for [Air] Command and Staff School. When I made colonel, I got a letter from General Sweeney [Maj Gen Charles W.] that I still have. It says, "The first thing we want to do is put our colonels through the [Air] War College, but because of your background in counterinsurgency and the war in Southeast Asia, we are going to waiver that." Well, it's fortunate; I probably would have flunked out. (Laughter)

A: Well, that would have been another story. When you say you were a flight instructor at Maxwell, what were they flying there?

G: We had about 140 or 150 airplanes. We had B-25s, B-26s, C-45s, a couple of C-47s, a C-46, a couple of T-6s. All the IPs [instructor pilots] were current in all of them. We were instructor pilots in everything. Our job, as soon as the Air University started in August, was to check out the whole Air University in an airplane so they could go across country. We gave them their instrument checks.

If they went out on a cross-country--let's say they went to California--if the weather was bad, it didn't matter. They left that airplane and grabbed something and got back by 8:00 Monday morning. They left airplanes everywhere when the weather was bad. If they broke, they came back some way, commercial or whatever. On Monday we all went out to pick up these airplanes they had left all over the country. It was great; we loved it; we flew. (Laughter)

I was flying safety officer; I gave the flying safety lectures. I worked in the instrument school. I was an instructor pilot, assistant base operations officer, and managed the baseball team in season, until the war came along.

A: Is there a need for the students in today's Air Force--of course they don't have any airplanes--but was there a vital need in those days for the students to maintain their flying during that 9 months down at Maxwell? At that time how did you feel about it?

G: At that time people stayed in the Air Force to fly airplanes. Today they stay in the Air Force to go to school. It is that simple. If I couldn't have flown, I wouldn't have stayed in the Air Force. I wouldn't have cared what the pay was. The pay never ever figured into the guys that got in or got out.

Well, to finish my tale about getting a Regular commission; I went over to Fort Benning to meet the Board. It was an Army Air Force Board because we were being integrated into the Army. A lot of people integrated into the Army went to the Army, pilots, and made Regular; and they kept them at Benning or sent them somewhere else.

Fortunately, I met Jack Price's board. This West Pointer immediately got on my back. He said, "You have no educational background. What makes you think you can compete with people out of the Academy and ROTC?" I said, "Well, I don't know. I can't recognize the difference. I have been in the Air Force now since 1942. I have had command positions that very few people have at this stage of their career in the Air Force. I've done about every job, and today I couldn't tell you the difference in whether I was commissioned through the cadet program or whether he was a West Pointer." Old Price liked that. (Laughter) I said, "I don't see where that has a hell of a lot to do with it."

It is a matter of motivation and desire." I figured, "Boy, this guy gave me a hard time. That's it."

I went out and told my wife Jessie over lunch at the club--I was married in 1946; this was 1947--"Well, I'm certain I didn't make it." Old Colonel Price came up and sat down with us at lunch. He said, "You haven't got anything to worry about." So knowing a guy--we played touch football; he was in a league and had been All-American at West Point--and my athletic background is probably what helped me more than anything else in my career in getting through cadets or anywhere else.

A: That was big in those days.

G: Damn right. That was part of--people could respond. Since that day, I've never had time to go to school in the Air Force. I've always had important jobs. All my friends went off to college at the expense of the Air Force. I know people that stayed in the Air Force 20 years and got out. They were educated in the Air Force and never made one damn contribution. You know them, and I know them.

A: Did they ever offer you Bootstrap or anything like that?

G: Oh, no. They never offered me anything. In fact, I applied for Command and Staff School. I never was selected. I was in Europe as a UW [unconventional warfare] planner. I had thought that after being on the staff over there that I ought to have a chance to go to the Command and Staff School so I applied, and I wasn't selected. I said, "Boy, you better get to where you can build a career," so I went back to CIA. I have been with CIA twice. That was the best thing I ever did because it kept me in the unconventional warfare aspects.

Anyway, a funny thing. We were at Maxwell, and we lived on base. It was the summer of 1950. We had gone up to Algonquin Park [Canada] and on north to go fishing. I was out in the boondocks with my mother-in-law and my wife. I had a radio, and I turned it on. It said that the North Koreans had invaded South Korea. It was about 11:00 at night, and I said, "We've got to go home." I packed them up, and we started out. I drove all the way to Maxwell to volunteer. I thought the war was going to be over before I could volunteer. We drove all the way back, never stopped, didn't get a motel.